

Bridge over the Lumi i Tiranes.



WIM CUYVERS

TIRANA - MERCEDES, HOUSES AND RUBBISH

In the north of the city, by the narrow, rickety, little wooden bridge over the great river, the Lumi i Tiranes, quickly and carelessly knocked together by people from the neighbourhood, sits a good-looking young man with brilliantined black hair, carefully tended stubble and gleaming shoes. He is delighted to speak German and says that he can deliver any type of Mercedes for €5,000 if the buyer is prepared to accept the absence of paperwork – though for €1,000 extra

even that can be provided – with leather seats, of course, otherwise he would not bother. He says that he gets them mainly from Switzerland, but that he is going to widen his area of activity a bit, towards France and Germany, and he deals only in Mercedes: the locks and alarm systems have no secrets from him, and demand is assured, everyone in Tirana wants a Mercedes. His capital outlay is small: a single ticket to Switzerland, fuel for the return journey (though most of the cars have full tanks), and a further

€50 for the customs officials. The young man sits on a pile of grey concrete blocks, which his father and brother are using to build a house. The dirt road, deeply potholed, is lined with rubbish; piles of rubbish line the banks of the river, and PET bottles, bits of polystyrene foam and plastic bags float in the water.

For all that, Tirana is once again one of the safest cities in Europe. During the popular revolt in Albania in 1997, a million weapons were stolen from government armouries. But



Metropolitan area Tirana, as presented in the masterplan: surrounded by green oases.



Architecture Studio's masterplan for the centre of Tirana, March 2004.

these seem to have been turned in long ago. The time when every Albanian went around with a Kalashnikov is past. Two thousand people died during the revolt that erupted after the collapse of the pyramid systems in which almost two-thirds of the three and a half million inhabitants of Albania had invested, in which almost half of the GDP circulated, and which brought down the government. This was the umpteenth collapse in a short period, since the death in 1985 of Enver Hoxha, the supposedly immortal communist leader, one of the founders of the Albanian communist party, who ruled the country for so long and in such an unusual way (no private ownership permitted, no foreign influence or information tolerated, agricultural land massively privatised, links broken with Russia and later with China, who covered his country with semicircular concrete bunkers), and in 1991 the collapse of the harsh communist regime under which the country had lived for almost half a century.

Tirana is the city of the Mercedes. No other country in the world has such a high percentage of Mercedes. Every Westerner who comes to Tirana is shocked to see the stream of Mercedes wending their way through the mud or dust of the city's streets, along roads from which the manhole covers were stolen ages ago, long before the current steel crisis brought about by the frenzy of building in Asia made this practice popular around the world. Albania is in many respects a precursor: a city full of holes and pitfalls. Even the unstructured way in which the Albanians build their unplanned single-family houses makes Westerners raise their eyebrows. But probably the thing that most disturbs them is the rubbish which seems to lie around everywhere.

However grotesque it might sound, the Mercedes, the unplanned single-family houses and the rubbish all tell the same tale, the tale of a population which has had enough of the organised collective, which rejects and rides roughshod over the planned collective, the tale of people who long for private ownership, who want private property so desperately that they have no problem whatsoever with taking it (a Mercedes) from another private owner or withdrawing from the collective or the collective domain. Since the beginning of the 1990s, large-scale building has been going on in the parks in Tirana's city centre, by and around the Lumi i Lanes, the smaller river that runs through the centre, and on the street pavements; kiosks, shop extensions and houses sprung up everywhere. It is the tale of a strange and attractive confusion between private and public. Since

Mayor Edi Rama ordered the destruction of masses of illegal buildings in the centre of Tirana.



October 2000, however, the flamboyant Edi Rama has been the mayor of Tirana (re-elected in 2003 by 61% of the votes cast). He is not only a mayor but also an artist appreciated in certain international circles. At the beginning of the 1990s, he was an anti-communist professor at Tirana's Academy of Art; he was once almost beaten to death by the henchmen of President Sali Berisha and lived for some time as an artist in Paris, where he learnt the language and mannerisms and built up goodwill and international contacts. In 1998 he became Minister of Culture, Youth and Sport, under Nano. One of his first acts in this capacity was to allow Hollywood films to be shown in Albania. When Edi Rama campaigns, he makes use of great hoardings bearing only the name 'Edi Rama', like the signature Juan Miro put at the bottom of his paintings, and it must be admitted that there is some justice in this: Rama has after all had Tirana, 'his' city, painted to his own designs. To erase the image of a drab city, he prepared rough designs and had the city's works departments paint the buildings in the city centre in the most garish colours in accordance with those designs. After four years it is already possible to start talking about style periods. He roars 'Tirona' (with a very strong local accent) in a video clip by West Side Family, the local hip hop band. He is accused of corruption and misuse of funds; he has arranged for massive amounts of illegal building in the city centre to be demolished. He launched the 'Clean and Green' project and had blue lights and fences

placed by the sheltered (and sheltering) space under the bridges over the Lumi i Lanës. He makes pathetic statements: 'being the mayor of Tirana is the highest form of conceptual art. It's art in a pure state'. And he immediately turns to his own advantage the obvious criticism that he is only concerned with façadism: 'Tirana is the city where not just women but also façades of the buildings can wear make-up'.

BLINDNESS

What at first sight might appear a positive act of renewal is in fact a completely reactionary policy of control and economy. It was therefore no accident that when an international competition was recently held for a town plan for Tirana, the French firm of Architecture Studio emerged as the winner. Apparently, according to the rumour from the resigned jury (Nano, Rama, Schroeder, Gunod, Pisani, Stroink, Eliasson, Greulich and Zenghelis), the French Connection (Nano-Rama-Chirac) was strong enough to achieve this. Architecture Studio's winning design entry, which can be seen in the National Gallery in Tirana, splashes green all over the model, the perspectives and the plans.

Architecture Studio has only seen the city centre and clearly saw only the old marks placed there during the period of Italian fascism under Mussolini by the architects Florestano de Fausto and Armando Brasini. It took the whole thing further with the same means, but for different masters, just as in their day De Fausto and Brasini were not averse to turning their

hand to work one day for the fascists and the next day for the Pope. Architecture Studio failed to see that in the previous ten years the city had experienced a fivefold increase in size, growing in the 1990s from a relatively small city of 200,000 inhabitants into a city of almost a million inhabitants. Even more incredibly, the architects have not seen how special this growth really was and what a special kind of city it has created, nor did they realise that this spectacular growth might well be significant, because the collapse had made Tirana a kind of laboratory, and what happened there could be an important test case, with something to say about the world to come.

In its proposal Architecture Studio wiped out (in Photoshop) the new city which had developed to the north of the Lumi i Tiranës and to the east and south of the old city, and replaced it with an amorphous green tangle. The habitat of hundreds of thousands of people was wiped out without their knowing it. Architecture Studio never saw the contemporary reality of miles and miles of individual dwellings built one behind the other, separated from one another by streets sized to suit the width of a Mercedes. Even if someone had flown Architecture Studio to the districts of Babrru or Paskoan, it still would not have seen the reality, nor wished to see it, for its reality was determined by its vapid Studio glasses. Architecture Studio showed that its office was only able and willing to propose architecture and in so doing allowed itself to be manipulated by power and failed to see what was going on in front of its nose. That was the terrible thing about Architecture Studio's design: it was not a design overtaken by reality, or a plan overtaken by reality, but a plan that had never seen Tirana's radiant reality.

WALKING

I believe that current reality can be appreciated, quickly and efficiently, by wandering through the city again and again, following routes that are not designated for tourists but that cut through everything: walks not guided by neon advertisements, by commerce, by views or by viewpoints, walks that are worked through as a protocol is worked through, as a compelling novel is read, from beginning to end. This is a

way of gaining understanding without any illusion of working scientifically or ambition to do so. If Architecture Studio had done this, it would have seen that Tirana is not a boulevard designed and constructed by the fascists, it would not have cooperated with the mayor's swollen ego, and it would not have allowed itself to be trapped into developing a plan intended to be realised over the next 30 years. Who in heaven's name still believes in a 30-year plan? It would not have lent itself to encouraging some flashy high-rise to be put up in the city centre, which can only lead to the gradual abandonment of the plan when it turns out that the phallic buildings will never have the misty transparency suggested by the images drawn by Architecture Studio.

If the people that Architecture Studio put on the project had walked until the tendons connecting their feet to their legs were inflamed and the endless breathing in of clouds of exhaust fumes from the Mercedes

had brought about a state of trance, they would have seen that the city of Tirana is no longer limited to the territory of Tirana - and had not been for a long time - but extends out to Durres, Kruja and Elbasan. In Kruja they would have seen how it was historically destined to fall into the clutches of tourism, but on the way they would also have seen the identical rows of furniture shops with the great metallic-grey garage doors and the gleaming white pits in the countryside where lime is slaked, and they would have seen how well the informal public transport works. In Durres they would have seen high-rises developed with a view of the sea, with restaurants and cafes, and how little this differed from the sit-

Who in heaven's name still believes in a 30-year plan?

uation on the Belgian coast, and perhaps the word leisure would have occurred to them. And on the road from Tirana to Elbasan they could have enjoyed the view and the fresh air on the climb, almost a thousand metres up. They could have seen the surrounding snow-capped peaks, but would also have seen how often the view is occupied by all sorts of

strange, new, disproportionately large buildings, garishly coloured and exaggeratedly decorated. In this way a picture of Tirana would have emerged as a complete city, with tourism, industry and areas of natural beauty, and of course with informal buildings spread all over the place.

Advance of the leisure culture between Tirana and Elbasan.



Presumably Architecture Studio would also have realised that this leisure eats up public space. In which case the architects would have seen that the only so-called public spaces to have developed in Tirana are the football cages: public space rented by the hour to play in. This would have shown them that leisure cannot provide a basis for public space: public space enclosed on all sides by wire netting, with even the air shut off and enclosed in greenery. And then their drawings for Skanderberg Square would have been different, perhaps showing a sleeping baby, lying abandoned on a sheet of cardboard on which people now and then drop a few coins, or a woman with no legs, but not in any event the beatific couples which they actually stuck in their picture.

And perhaps one of their walks would have taken them along the Lumi i Tiranës – if they had been enthusiastic they might even have walked the full length, a distance of at least ten kilometres – in which case they would have seen how this river acts like a great rubbish collector from one end of the city to the other and would have seen the different gypsy settlements along the river, and perhaps would have landed up on the huge rubbish dump, just behind the cemetery of course, in the south-west part of the city. And perhaps they would have realised that public space is space where rubbish piles up and is left standing because the space has not been privatised, has not been appropriated by anybody, so that because of negligence Tirana, a city bursting with privatisation, actually contains masses of public space (bordering on the mute and dead architecture of endless concrete block walls), but they would also have realised that Edi Rama is engaged in mopping up this public space, truly public space, the space of the needy. And perhaps they would have been able to realise that Rama and they were fighting the same battle, following the same strategy: clearing out the old centre, turning the old city centre into a festival ground, extending the axis initiated by the fascists, preparing the ground for big business – and who cares whether it conforms to international monetary regulations or comes from the Mafia?

And perhaps they would finally have realised that the Lumi i Tiranës has become the true centre line of Tirana, a jaggedly unclear line which is at any event at odds with the fascist axis, the Boulevard Shetitorja Deshmoret e Kombit, that the rubbish dump is a central point in the city, and that the people who came down from the mountains in the last ten or fifteen years and built walls several metres high round

An example of the illegal private building spreading throughout Albania.



plots that they had appropriated (because they were allocated them under the terms of the 1991 land redistribution, or because they bought them from some owner or other, or simply because they settled there in the hope that nobody stronger or more powerful would stand in their way) and built houses and grew a few vegetables there were a reflection of a worldwide dream, a worldwide reality one might say, capable of trampling down and crushing any intellectual scheme or concept, making the position of the artist and intellectual impossible (indeed it probably made it impossible long ago), leaving them behind, wandering round the rubbish, where no direction can be found. ✖

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